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AN EXPERIMENT IN THE TEACHING OF HIGH-SCHOOL COMPOSITION

W. C. REAVIS
St. Louis, Missouri

One of the greatest obstacles in the teaching of English composition is the lack of suitable material for themes. This is too frequently overlooked by the teachers of English in the assignment of written work. It is not an uncommon practice in many high schools, either to leave the selection of theme subjects almost wholly to the pupils or, when assignments are made, to give such subjects as are listed in the textbooks of composition and rhetoric, which in the large majority of cases are without interest to most of the pupils to whom they are assigned. It is, therefore, not at all surprising to find the interests of the pupils in composition writing in many high schools stagnant, and the work regarded as a dry and lifeless task.

A condition similar to that just described confronted the English department in the high school over which the writer had charge a year ago. The pupils were taking little interest in theme writing and the character of their work was decidedly inferior. In fact, the bimonthly publication of the high school was maintained with the greatest difficulty, owing to the mediocre character of the work handed in for publication. The causes of the indifference on the part of many pupils toward the work were easily ascertained.

- (1) They had no impelling motives to do well the tasks assigned.
- (2) Their own repertoire of subjects appeared to be exhausted, and they had no source material from which to draw, when the selection of the theme was left to them.

In order to correct these conditions, the pupils were given the task of gathering the pioneer history of the community in the form of reports on specific topics. The particular form in which these reports were to be written was left to the originality and ingenuity of the pupils; however, they were free to consult the teachers for

suggestions at any time. The pupils were encouraged to interview the older citizens of the community, to examine monuments and relics, and to consult the county and city records, newspaper files, and printed matter relating to the early history of that particular section of the state. In every case the source of the information was to be acknowledged, and quotations when used were to be properly marked.

The reports covered such general topics as: The Character of the Earliest Settlers; Their Language; Occupations; Modes of Life; Clothing; Amusements; Social Customs; Institutions; The Development of Leading Industries; Notable Historic Undertakings; and Biographies of the Citizens Who Had Contributed Most to the Development of the Community. Out of these general reports, such specific topics as the following were chosen for individual themes: The Nationality of Our Pioneers; A Chat with the Earliest Settler; The Making of a Settlement; Cooking in Pioneer Days; The Spelling Bee; The Husking Bee; The Singing School; Courtship in Pioneer Days; Fashions in Pioneer Times; The District School; The Village Church; A Pioneer Lawsuit; The Digging of the Old Canal; The Building of the First Railroad; Trade Barons of the Early Community, etc.

The pupils took great interest in gathering this material and prepared their reports with care, showing individuality and ingenuity in form, and a marked improvement in expression. The motives underlying the work were both novel and new. They also realized that every piece of work well done would be placed on file in the school library, and would become a contribution to the written history of the community. Furthermore, the reports were to be put to a later use in providing source material for the preparation of a play embodying the community's history and recreating the life of its earliest days. The interests in such material are racial, and make a strong appeal to the imagination of the large majority of pupils. Then too, the work meets with the co-operation of and a ready response from the community, an influence not to be overlooked in securing a high type of work in the school.

After the reports were finished, plots were submitted from various pupils for the historical play. These plots were turned over

to the pupils of the Senior class, with a view to working out a suitable plot for the type of play to be written. The plots were discussed and criticized and the suggestions were utilized by the class in making a plot that would meet the conditions determined by the material at hand. This was done in round-table discussion, and the play was written in the same manner.

In order that members from all classes might participate in the play and thus maintain the interest of the entire school until the close of the experiment, a cast of forty-two characters was provided, and the assignment of parts was thoroughly representative. The lines were learned with little difficulty, and the play was easily staged, due to the excellent co-operation on the part of the community. When the play was presented the oldest citizens came as the guests of the school, and all agreed that the attempt to recreate the pioneer life of the community in its historical settings had proved a success.

The results of the experiment on the written work of the school and on the relations between the school and the community were most salutary. They may be summarized as follows:

1. The attitude of the pupils toward the English department was radically changed. Instead of looking upon theme writing as a dry and useless task, they regarded it as a pleasure and seemed to understand its purpose in the course of study.

2. In doing this type of work, the pupils seemed to discover a method of work that not only made future writing easier, but also gave them a consciousness of standards of attainment, and a self-confidence in their own ability that resulted in talent apparently latent being brought to the attention of the entire school. This was the inevitable result of learning to do a piece of work well, and clearly shows that one composition thoroughly worked out and conscientiously written is worth more to the pupil than a score simply written in compliance with a class-room rule.

3. In order to awaken compelling motives in the pupils to do high-class written work, a premium was placed on the "worth-while-ness" of the task, and source material was supplied that stimulated the imagination and furnished the suggestions for original ingenious effort. The character of the source material and

the use to which it was to be put made the realization of this purpose an easy matter.

4. Through co-operative work the pupils found out just what was expected of them. The inquiries and readings, and the class reports furnished them ideas; the previous study of models gave them clear notions of the formal elements of composition, and the suggestions received through their investigations aided them in organizing the material and expressing it in a more acceptable style.

5. The encouragement received from, and the interest manifested by, the community kindled the enthusiasm of the pupils for the work, and caused them to put forth the extra effort essential to high-class workmanship.

6. The participation of all the classes in the presentation of the play, carrying with it the satisfaction of "sharing equally in the spoils," contributed in no small degree to a good spirit between the classes, and to the unification of the English work in the school.

The value of the above experiment is not to be found in the use of local historical material alone, although local history furnishes an interesting and fruitful field for theme work; but in the method of work. Most pupils who are taught to gather facts, and to organize them with reference to a given theme, will have little difficulty with expression. Their motives will grow stronger with successful endeavor, and composition writing will cease to be a burdensome and meaningless task.